

[Keystone]

26083

March 13, 1939.

Mrs. Van Winder Shields

3427 Oak-st.

Jacksonville,

Florida

(Early resident)

Rose Shephard, Writer

KEYSTONE - VILLA ALEXANDRIA - Early Jacksonville.

Mrs. Shields, the Widow of the Rev. Van Winder Shields for many years the beloved rector of St. Johns Episcopal Church, is now in failing health and had to cancel two previous appointments before feeling able to see the writer at 2 o'clock in the afternoon of this pleasant March day.

"I do not rise until noon, and even then the day seems long," she said plaintively. "My eyesight is very poor; I have not been able to read anything except the broad headlines of the newspapers for some time, and it is a great disadvantage, as I used to enjoy reading so much. My son comes in the evenings and reads to me, also my daughter and granddaughter read the papers and magazines, so I keep in touch with what is going on in the world and locally.

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"My information may not be of much value, but I'll be glad to give you what I have known of Jacksonville for the past fifty years.

"Mr. Shields and I came with our small family in 1889 from New Bern, North Carolina. I am sorry to tell you how much I disliked the change. The parish at New Bern had been long established; the church was beautiful, the rectory roomy and comfortable, and in such a lovely setting. Of course, the altitude is much higher there, the air was so pure and cool, lovely old oak and elm trees all around the place, and homes of the old families. In contrast, Jacksonville seemed so barren, with its sandy streets and no pavements. There is nothing in [?] of the pioneer spirit; the prospect was/ discouraging.

"Right next to the parish house at New Bern, Governor Tryon 2 erected the magnificent mansion which caused such an upheaval in North Carolina politics, resulting later in his impeachment and removal from his high office.

"When the building was vacated, it became the rectory school, for which purpose it was well adapted. After we left there, it burned, only one long retaining wall remaining intact. Considered a menace to adjoining property, an attempt was made to forcibly tear it down, but the fire had so glazed and welded the bricks together that it was impossible to make any inroads, and the structure still stands, a silent reminder of North Carolina's stormy governor.

"Mr. Shields was very anxious to succeed in his new charge, wanted to accomplish big things in Jacksonville; I wanted also to help and be a part of his accomplishments, so I started in to adapt myself to the change from the old settlement to the new, and the people of Jacksonville were so wonderful to us, and especially to me, that new friends and new interests replaced the old, and I soon forgot my homesickness.

"Keystone" was at its loveliest when we first came. Mrs. Cummings came to St. Johns and met Mr. Shields and myself. She was such a fine, devout woman, we became very fond

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of her. Her husband turned out to be a very unworthy man, but her disappointment never seemed to disturb her own calm or her faith in other people.

“Mrs. Cummings was the daughter of, Asa Packer, promoter and developer of the Lehigh Valley Railroad, of Pennsylvania, and inherited a very large fortune. ‘Keystone’ had been developed as a winter home. Their summer residence was at Mauchunk, Pennsylvania where Mr. Shields and I also visited Mrs. Cummings on two occasions.

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>“Mr. Platt, the English caretaker at ‘Keystone’, seemed to be a perfect wizard with the flowers and gardens. Mrs. Cummings was especially fond of roses, and there were great beds of both red and white ‘American Beauties’. When she went north in the spring, Mr. Platt had orders to supply me with roses, and each week he brought them in to me - great armfuls. A few stalks remain of the old plantings.

“There was an artesian well of splendid water on the place. There were a number of buildings besides the residence and the caretaker's house at the gate. There were large stables, a carpenter shop, a separate laundry building, also the bowling alley, with a front room for playing cards.

“The swimming pool was a treat attraction, as well as the tennis courts, with nearby a dance pavilion. The children of St. Johns used to have many good times there - picnics, dances, and other outings. They were always welcomed by their gracious hostess.

“At the time of the great fire of 1901, St. Johns Church, the rectory, and most of our personal belongings were swept away. Mrs. Cummings came to our rescue, taking us down to ‘Keystone’ where we lived for six months, returning again to Jacksonville in the month of September.

“At this time, Mr. Platt would place kerosene lanterns all around to light up the grounds, but in the house we burned candles.

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"The destruction of Jacksonville had disrupted the sewerage, and everybody was ill. We all had malaria and were dreadfully sick all summer. For many years I could not bear to go to 'Keystone' as the memory of the terrible holocaust and our long illness afterwards was hard to efface.

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"During our six months at 'Keystone' Mrs. Cummings discussed with my husband her plan to leave the property to the Church for a children's home, and asked his advice as to whether she should in her will designate the Episcopal Discuss or St. Johns Church parish as the beneficiary.

"My husband suggested St. Johns, and asked that she designate it as a home for the better class of boys, as there was enough done and sometimes too much for the indigent children, while there was no help for the advancement of the more promising. Also, he felt girls were in most cases better provided for by different charities than boys. And so, at Mrs. Cummings' death, the property came to St. Johns Church as the 'Keystone Home for Boys'.

"Rev. Mr. Ambler W. Blackford was placed in charge. He had received splendid training for this particular work under his father, who for forty years was principal of the Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia. He has done wonderful work and during his regime three fine young clergyman, have developed from the boys in his charge, whose education he supervises.

"The endowment left by Mrs. Cummings was at first entirely sufficient for the upkeep of 'Keystone' but now it is not, and Rev. and Mrs. Blackford have a hard time making [?] stretch sufficiently to cover the requirements of the eleven boys now in residence there.

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"Added to his many accomplishments, Mrs Blackford is an expert with flowers, especially calla lilies, which he has developed to a high state of beauty and hardiness. The vase on the mantel in the dining room bears a dozen beauties he brought in to me today.

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"Well, back to early days again. After a short while, we came to love the people of Jacksonville, and they certainly loved us and never failed to show it.

"There were many old families, who, with their descendants, had been here since the incorporation of the town. And what should we not owe these pioneers? They who built up their church, bringing up their children amid hardship and few facilities, but with the steadfast faith to carry on?

"My younger son has married a western girl, whose/ grand- parents were '49ers of Colorado, and I am astounded at the stories they have handed down to their children of their early struggles in the west; the ever-present scourge of savage Indians; the pitiful young mother giving birth to a still-born baby the same day her first child died of a lingering fever. But they survived, how I cannot understand; I never could have done it, because, as I said, I have not a pioneer spirit.

"But we had good times, even in the early 1890's. Everyone was so kind and friendly. I remember the 'Patriarchs' - a dancing club of young people. Sometimes they went to the Yacht Club at the foot of Market Street, and again to the Seminole Club for their dance parties.

"I used to chaperone my two older sons - chaperones were considered proper for young people's affairs then, although they are completely 'out' now. They hired an orchestra; sometimes a stringed band would furnish the music. Judge Young used to come, and Governor Fleming was a frequent visitor to the 'Patriarchs' and also to the Yacht Club

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dances, and they would dance and dance. I think it is fun for the older people to take such interest and enjoy themselves.

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"During the 1901 fire the Yacht Club was burned, and another location was selected on the river opposite where the market now is, which was later disposed of and the club established in its present location.

"After the fire the only building of consequence left standing in the downtown section was the old Armory at Forsyth and Market Streets. The first 'Patriarchs' dance was held there. It was a fancy dress ball, and the prize costume was that of Red Ridinghood worn by a local young lady.

"All the dances started promptly at 9 o'clock, and at midnight closed with 'Home Sweet home.'

"There were never any refreshments. I remember in the early 1900's, while the men would go downstairs to the bar for drinks, the girls had nothing, not even lemonade, and the girls rebelled. One was Blanche Baker, who said she would never come to another dance unless the girls were provided with refreshments, too. Two or three held out with her, but the young men were adamant. Finally they were told it was pretty ugly of them to offer such persistent opposition, and they gave in. After that, the 'Patriarchs' - girls and all, as well as the chaperones - had 'refreshments.'

"Yes, I remember 'Villa Alexandria' very well. It was in its heyday when I first came to Jacksonville, and was a most beautiful place. How, all that remains as a reminder is the double row of Camphor trees - Mrs. Mitchell thought campher in time would be produced commercially in Florida, the trees were so prolific and grew so readily - and she said - 'David will always have plenty of money to carry on this venture.' Poor David! Little did anyone think of the failure of the large fortune which should have come to him.

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"And the old fountain, too, is still there.

"I remember one hot day in the summer, the Dells' - our neighbors and I were asked woen to Villa Alexandria for luncheon. The Dells had horses and a nice carriage, and we arrived in state after a long warm journey.

"Mrs. Mithchell, who was a small dark woman, was on the porch to recieve us, all dressed in beautiful white silk, with young David, also in white, by her side to do the honors.

"After chatting a while, we were invited into the beautiful dining room, with the rare furnishings which characterised the house throughout; the imported paintings in panels on the walls, the [fresceed?] ceilings, the mahogany dining table with its lace cloth, and in the center was an alcohol lamp with a steaming kettle for hot tea on this blistering day!

"Mrs. Mitchell did china painting as a hobby, having a kiln in the yard where she fired her pieces. On the table this day were a set of six teacups and saucers, painted in brilliant colers by her own hand, with gold edges and gold painted handles. She apologized for the heavy coat of gold, saying: 'I could not seem to make the ordinary gold stick, so I melted up five or six ten dollar gold pieces and used that on these cups and saucers.'

"It was a treat to walk over the beautifully landscaped grounds, with imported trees, flowers and shrubs. Over the end of the porch was the most beautiful vine I have ever seen. It was like the 'love vine' of mexico with its red heart-shaped flowers, except the flowers on this vine were snow-white.

"And young David Mitchell, Mrs. Mitchell's grandson, had everything on the face of the earth that his dating grandmother could supply. And how he tried to hold on to the old place when disaster 8 eveloped the Mitchell fortune! He slept in the old empty house, claiming he had title to it, even after it had been legally transferred to others, and on one occasion shot a real estate man who tried to take possession. On another occasion it was

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reported Mr. Stockton had offered him \$50,000, for a quitclaim deed, but this he refused, claiming he was the sole owner.

"Another place below 'Keystone' was owned by the Matthews', also Pennsylvania people. As soon as she had the place opened in the winter, Mrs. Matthews used to send for me to spend the day, and the sooner had I arrived after the long drive than she would say; 'Come, let's take a walk through the woods and around the place; it's like Paradise!' I presume it did seem like Paradise to her, in comparison with the cold of her northern home, but I was not so keen on long tramps through the woods. I preferred my Paradise in views from the front porch.

"Do you think we will get the government air-base?" she asked, in quick shift of the conversation to the present. "I hope we do. Jacksonville is the logical place for it.

"No, I do not believe the noise of overhead airplanes will be much of a disturbance. We will just have to get used to it, they are bound to come sooner or later.

"I remember one time we moved into a North Carolina section, where our home was near a sawmill. My niece came to visit us, and she said; 'Auntie, how in the world do you stand all that racket?' I told her it did bother for a couple of days, but after the third day I never noticed it, and so it will be with the numerous airplanes.

"We will get the Florida ship canal, too. I feel sure of it. Garry Buckman and Walter Ceachman, those two fine Floridians I have known almost since they were born. They have got their teeth into this thing, and they'll never be satisfied until the canal is assured.

"You know," she said reminiscently, "I am very fond of boys. I seem to get along with them better than girls. Boys are so frank and out in the open with everything. They may be as bad as the mischief, but they'll come through with the truth. Girls are different. They always seem to be on the defensive and conceal most of their thoughts. This was explained to me once by a noted teacher who was a guest at our home for several days. He said; 'mrs.

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Shields, a woman has to be on the defensive side. At first, she has to defend her young, then her actions and her reputation, so it is natural for her not to be quite so frank and aboveboard as the male sex.'

"Speaking of the canal," she went back to her former subject, "You know Florida has more than once been interested in a cross-state canal. I remember once Governor Fleming has some very distinguished guests whom he entertained at dinner and Mr. Shields and myself were invited. Next to me sat General Goethals, an army man, a member of the party which was on a tour of inspection of Florida, considering the possibility of constructing a canal. He entertained me all evening with his enthusiastic [prognostications?] of the value of such a feature, the time it would save ships in reaching points on the Gulf of Mexico and Central America, instead of the long trip around the end of the Peninsula. He said the Texas people were anxious for it, since it would bring them two days nearer in Atlantic shipping service.

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"By the way," Mrs. Shields said, "I just happened to remember one incident that took place one evening shortly after our arrival in Jacksonville, that came near resulting seriously.

"We had just sat down to supper. There was a knock on the door, and the mulatto cook came running in, her face an ashen white, and blurted out without ceremony, 'dah's a strange man at the do' says He's house is afiah!"

"The 'strange young man' turned out to young Mr. C. D. Rinehart. The roof was ablaze around the chimney of the rectory, an old rather run down building a short distance from where the present St. Johns rectory stands. Mr. Rinehart went with us to the attic, which had become a storehouse for old unused furniture, and helped us pull away some old chairs from the path of the flames, and with buckets of water and strenuous beating we soon had the flames extinguished.

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"So us's house lasted until the big fire swept it out of existence along with the church and other buildings in that section."

The afternoon was now well past and members of the family were coming in to supper, so the interview was brought to a close, with Mrs. Shields volunteering any additional information that might be helpful.